

NRCS SC Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – April 17, 2012

NRCS SC STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

April 17, 2012, 9:30 a.m.

*South Carolina Farm Bureau Building
Cayce, SC*

Present: Ann English (STC NRCS), Margie Onstad (SAO, NRCS); Pam Thomas (SSS, NRCS); Evelyn Whitesides (SRC, NRCS), Amy Overstreet (SC NRCS) Kellee Melton (SC NRCS) ; Frances & Hezekiah Gibson (United Farmers, USA - Landowner); Janie Harris; Joe Cockrell (USFW); Chanda Cooper (Richland Soil & Water Conservation District); Marc Cribb (SC DNR); Yvonne King (Aiken SWCD); Carl Coleman (Dillon county Soil & Water Commission); Bruce Price (Dillon SWCD); Alan Gaddy (Dillon County Soil & Water Commission); Phillip Elliott (FSA); Meredith B. Murphy (SC DHEC); Neely Page (Aiken SWCD); Aubrey White (Marion SWCD); Rafael Mendez (NRCS, Lexington); Cassandra Rush (NRCS Federation); Jim Huggins (Marion SWCD); William O. McMeekin, PE (NRSK, LLC.); Larry Harris; Russell Hubright (SC Forestry Commission); Scott Phillips (SCFC); Karen Brady (SC NRCS); Jill Miller (SCRA); Greg Yarrow; Jay Purnell; Bill Ardrey; Buddy Atkins; Bill Chaplin (SCDHEC); Laurie C. Lawson (FSA); Bill Melven (Lexington SWCD); Patrice Moses (SC NRCS); Gary Peters (National Wild Turkey Federation); Angela Yarborough (SC NRCS)

Opening remarks from Ann English, State Tech Committee Chair/SC NRCS - State Conservationist:

- Welcomed all participants, asked all attendees to introduce themselves and where they worked.
- Acknowledged May as being National Wetlands Month; 20 year anniversary for Wetland Reserve Program
- 150th year anniversary of USDA; May 15, 1862 established USDA better known as the “People Department” by President Abraham Lincoln
- Addressed agenda
 1. Water Quality Initiative
 2. Three Initiatives
 3. Conservation Partnership teleconference on 18 April 2012; 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Comments from Carl Coleman – Dillon County Soil and Water Commission

- **Issues: Cover Crop Program** – Request consideration and changes: Need a Conservation Cover Crop program that does not require a nitrogen application; this is an extra trip across the field and increases compaction & extra expenses.
- Main purpose of Cover Crop is to reduce soil erosion from water or wind; need to concentrate on cover crops that add organic matter and increase moisture holding capacity of the soil during dry periods; treat that program where more people can do it and would want to do it and makes it more beneficial.
- **No-till Requirement for 70% of Cover** – Requirement is excessive and very difficult to achieve in the coastal plains are due to variables such as growing degree days, higher temperatures, and moisture variances which create an environment for faster break down of residue.
- Would like to see 30-50% rule; would be more applicable.
- **Nutrient Management (New Technology)** – Would like to see a program that looks at infrared technology, that addresses actual plant needs nitrogen; could be used under nutrient management program.
- A sensor that takes a reading of the crop as it's growing; makes immediate recommendation of amount of nitrogen needed; request funds from EQIP program.
- **Integrated Pest Program** – No one uses because of products; needs to be simple so that more producers will use; too bulky for the operator to adequately justify considering time and cost.

NRCS SC Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – April 17, 2012

- **Soil Compaction and Low Carbon Sequestration** – This is a high importance resource concern in South Carolina. Corn does not need to be considered a high residue crop and a cover crop following corn should be encouraged. Many times corn does not leave enough residue and a cover crop would be very beneficial.
- A special incentive program should be encouraged to provide an adequate date that shows results for special multi-species cover crops to reduce soil compaction, increase carbon sequestration, and provide data on no-till techniques for proper setting of no-till drills for better penetration thru the more dense cover.
- More emphasis should be placed on returning clear cut land to reseeded of pine/hardwoods.
- The Atlantic White Cedar should be encouraged when and where permissible for reseeded; this tree is supposed to be a good alternative to longleaf pine, very hearty and can be planted in wetter environments.
- We need help with resistant pigweed management on all acres in Dillon County. North Carolina has a program that pays a onetime \$100 per acre for planting grain sorghum. Allows the producer to use chemicals that will control resistant pigweed and help with nematodes while being able to plant behind wheat.
- Wild hog/deer control – money for purchasing gun with night scope and noise suppressor to be able to hunt at night when they are active.

Response from Evelyn Whitesides -

- **Conservation Cover Crop Program**
 1. *Conservation Cover Crop Program will probably be adjusted 2013 for convention versus no till system (verify with Evelyn)*
 2. *Currently we do have multi species cover crop payment scenario that does incorporate lagoons with no additional application of nitrogen; nitrogen is also optional upfront.*
- **No-till Residue of 70% Requirement**
 1. *Most states require 80% requirement.*
 2. *This is a practice that will be regionalized next year; will look into.*
- **Need a program that looks at Infrared Technology:** *We agree, this may be an investment for the future.*
- **Need a reasonable Integrated Pest Management Program:**
 1. *We look at reducing pest applications.*
 2. *May be possible for future scenarios; being reevaluated a FY2013.*
- **Special Incentive Program**
 1. *May want to apply for a conservation innovation grant.*
 2. *Also available enhancement thru CMP*
 3. *More into to follow.*
- **More emphasis on Returning Clear Cut Land -** *We do replant cut oversights*
- **Atlantic White Cedar –**
 1. *Currently we have National Longleaf Pine Initiative as focus*
 2. *Atlantic White Cedar not listed in standard, but in reference document & is permissible to plant.*
- **Wild hog & Deer Control -** *More info to follow, National Task currently working – Dick Yetter, State Biologist working.*

Comments from Larry Harris – Sumter County Farmer:

- Discussed the Plight of Small Specialty Crop Producers
 1. Irrigation is needed in area to produce quality crops.

NRCS SC Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – April 17, 2012

2. Specialty Crop growers need to be included in the Farm Bill in South Carolina
3. Need Conservation practices to be good stewards of the land.
4. Need assistance in receiving program payments.
5. Specialty Crop Producers need irrigation and engineering technology to set the wells where they would be properly suited & productive for the farm size; this would conserve water and not waste it.
6. Need funds to upgrade existing wells and funds to put in wells where there are none.

Response from Ann English – Will provide information on Farm Bill website (see below)

Information from the House Farm Bill Field Hearings, held on March 9th, March 23rd and March 30th, can be accessed at www.agriculture.house.gov/farmbill

No additional hearings were held, as Congress has not been session from April 2 through April 13, 2012, due to the holiday recess.

Upcoming Hearings and Briefings

As reported in earlier Legislative Summaries, Farm Bill field hearings have been scheduled to seek the view of rural Americas on the Farm Bill's crop subsidy and conservation and nutrition programs. House Agriculture Chairman Fran Lucas (R-OK) said the committee will schedule hearings on Capitol Hill after the field meetings end. The Last field hearing will be on April 20 (Friday), at the Magouirk Conference Center in Dodge City, KS. Information for this hearing can be accessed at www.agriculture.house.gov/farmbill

Congressional Schedule

The Senate will be in session from April 16 through April 20, 2012 and the House will be in session from April 16 through April 19, 2012.

Comments from Jim Huggins, Vice Chair of the Marion SWCD:

- **Discrepancy in the Local Level Prioritization of Resource Concerns**

1. The local conservation board has little input in the prioritizing of conservation practices in the District; don't feel this was the intent of the Landmark Legislation passed in the 30's.
2. Quoted a few principles from the Fall 2011 issue of the Resource magazine (*see below link for Principles*)
http://www.nacdnnet.org/policy/agriculture/farmbill/NACD_Farm_Bill_Principles_2012.pdf
3. Held an area meeting to set priorities, does not give a true picture of individual District needs.
4. Marion County has a highly capable & board as known to be true throughout the state.
5. Feels the local board should set the priorities for conservation practices in the district and the State Technical Committee will provide oversight.
6. Addressed this issue at annual conference to board members from across the state and they all support this change.
7. Feels with the local board prioritization we will reach more land owners & get more for our money & better accomplish the needs for the district and state.

Response from Kellee Melton regarding – Ranking Process

- *SC is structured into Watersheds; SC does not function with area offices.*
- *Ranking Pools broken down into watershed into three different land uses.*
- *Three land uses – Crop, Pasture & Forestry; each watershed has one account for each.*

NRCS SC Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – April 17, 2012

- *Local working group process difficult because of watershed structure; 2013 possible change.*
- *Ranking process is a working process.*
- *Agency will have to do more educating the local worker on how they can impact the ranking & try to make it work out for the individual county.*
- *Currently no way with number of initiatives and the very few EQIP dollars we get cannot have county wide funding pools.*
- *We were trying to do the watershed approach, if process changes next year we will have a lot of changes; if process changes will work to get to be the best locally led process it can be.*

Comments from Bill Ardrey, Conservation District Commissioner, Lancaster:

- Concerns regarding WHIP & EQIP (Longleaf Pines) programs
 1. Rules very restrictive on soil types & where you can plant longleaf.
 2. Deep sands currently only type allowed.
 3. Request expands of soil type to include heavy/sandier clay.
 4. District offices need to be more flexible with containerized ceiling

Response from Kellee Melton – Purpose of Longleaf was to establish the native eco-system; soil types within the historic range get higher priority than other soil types. If there were more money there would have applications funded outside that historic range, but because there is still a ranking process higher priority went to soil types within historic range.

Comments from Kellee Melton, SC NRCS - Assistant State Conservationist for Programs:

- **Working Lands for Wildlife Initiative**
 1. New initiative just announced a few weeks ago as the Working Land for Wildlife WHIP Initiative.
 2. SC will target one species that was agreed upon with US Fish & Wildlife (partnership with NRCS & US Fish & Wildlife).
 3. Looking at at-risk species habitat; not endangered; not threatened, but at risk, borderline.
 4. SC has Gopher Tortoise –
 - Only occurs in six (6) counties.
 - Only six counties that can participate in this initiative: Jasper, Beaufort, Aiken, Barnwell, Allendale & Hampton
 5. Core & Supporting Practices for this Initiative – Nation wide
 6. Core Practices:
 - Restoration & Management of Rare & Declining Habitats (643)
 - Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management (644)
 - Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645)
 - Early Successional Habitat Development & Management (647)
 - Stream Habitat Improvement and Management (395)
 7. Supporting Practices: (related to Longleaf i.e. – tree planting & conservation cover)
 - Structural and management practices that benefit species habitat and/or lifecycle needs.
 8. Application deadline is 30 April 2012.
 9. Will be a ranking process; and screening criteria within six counties.
 10. Trying to put more conservation on private lands; establish or protect the habitat of the Gopher Tortoise to keep it from being an endangered species.
 11. All WHIP funding into initiatives across the nation.
- **National Water Quality Initiative**
 1. This initiative has not yet been released; possibly 1 May 2012

NRCS SC Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – April 17, 2012

2. These are EQIP funds; just under \$400,000 – 5% of SC's initial allocation.
3. Objective is to accelerate targeted funding in FY12.
4. Look at 12 digit HUC watersheds & try to get them off the 303D list.
5. Worked with DHEC & State Technical Meeting.
6. Chose pollutants from list of digit HUCs that had impairments provided by NHQ.
 - *Provided slide with a list of practices (Core & Supporting)*
7. Took 3 HUCs – Dorchester Co. (Polk Swamp), Saluda Co. (upper littler Saluda River) & Florence Co. (Big Swamp).
8. State Water Quality and State Technical input needed by 20 April 2012.
9. National sign-up will not be announced until first week in May.
10. Two application period: May 18, 2012 & June 15, 2012 & all funds obligated by July 2, 2012.
11. Have under \$400,000 to put into these 3 watersheds.
12. Landowners will be notified through some form of direct contact.
13. The cost share is 75% or 90% for those that qualify as historically under served; historically under served are New and Beginning Farmer, Socially Disadvantaged, and Limited Resource Producer.

National Water Quality Initiative – Meredith

- NHQ 303D List 2 years old; in process of developing a new one with most current impairments.
- 303D list is 5 years worth of data access whether or not each individual dot is meeting water quality standards for a whole bunch of parameters.
- Where we had other financial investments already in place.
- DHEC will monitor Dorchester, Saluda & Florence locations and try to ensure a success story.
- Will assist in modeling portion.
- Increase in Water Quality monitoring – currently with 319 program DHEC has two dedicated staffers; no new stations currently being added.
- Ammonia Standard – have one but no impairments.

NRCS Financial Assistance Obligations to date – Kellee Melton

NOTE: This is “unofficial” data from ProTracts. Numbers are approximate.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) –

- Initial Allocation was approximately \$8.47 million. Overall, SC has obligated 64% of those funds in the following categories:
 - Animal Waste - \$660,000 covering 10 contracts
 - New/Beginning Farmers - \$771,000 covering 43 contracts
 - Limited Resource Producers - \$69,000 covering 8 contracts
 - Socially Disadvantaged Producers - \$266,000 covering 27 contracts
 - Specialty Crops – \$196,000 covering 6 contracts
 - Organic - \$18,936 covering 5 contracts
 - Seasonal High Tunnels - \$86,000 covering 14 contracts
 - On-Farm Energy - \$2,240 covering 1 contract
 - Longleaf Pine Initiative - \$60,000 covering 5 contracts
 - Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs) - \$172,000 covering 27 contracts
 - National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) – set aside \$382,000 (sign-up not yet announced)
 - Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) – set aside \$200,000 (applications have not been selected)

NRCS SC Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – April 17, 2012

- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** – Initial allocation was \$5.1 million. Currently, SC has approved 571 contracts totaling \$4.3 million. Of the total approved, approximately \$98,000 is for non-industrial private forestland (NIPF).

Any additional questions or thoughts regarding programs can be directed to Kellee Melton, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, kellee.melton@sc.usda.gov

Comments from Evelyn Whitesides, SC NRCS – State Resource Conservationist

- **Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative** (Assist our DC w/Conservation Planning in the Field)
 1. Concerns over the clerical burden; less technical expertise.
 2. Reduced time with customers.
 3. IT tools complex and too time consuming & competitive
 4. NHQ decided to simplify in 2007 Simplify conservation Delivery – Streamline:
 - Make easier for customers & employees
 - Increase efficiency and integrate across business lines
 - Ensure best technology possible.
 - Examples of Success:
 1. Field staff will spend as much as 75% to time in field.
 2. Over 80% of FA clerical time eliminated, automated or reassigned.
 3. Tools to guide employees through conservation assistance steps
 4. Tools and data are accessible to staff when and where needed.
 5. “Admin” time from application to funding is 2 weeks or less.
 6. Resource concerns document all TA service and FA obligations.
 7. FA business processes re standardized nationwide.
 - New Tool
 1. To become effective in October.
 2. New mobile planner, e-signatures.
 3. FOR Client: Web base system & client gateway (client can go in request technical assistance; request financial assistance, view, sign and upload documents)
 4. Client Gateway for customer; Conservation Desktop for Field Offices.
 5. Will start implementing in South Carolina in the Fall.
 - Conservation Practice Standards
 1. All current standards are available in Section IV of the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG).
 2. NRCS we take national standards that are updated every five years; SC tweak to be state specific.
 3. STC can review standards at anytime and make comments & forward to Evelyn Whitesides.
 4. Draft standards are posted on website.
 5. Current Standards Under Review
 - Herbaceous Weed Control
 - Conservation Cover
 - Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
 - Shallow Water
 - Shallow Water Development
 - Early Successional Habitat Development/Management
 - Stream Habitat Improvement
 - Critical Area Planning

NRCS SC Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – April 17, 2012

- Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)
 1. CIG is a voluntary program intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and new technologies
 2. CIG, EQIP funds are used to award competitive grants to:
 - State or local unit of government
 - Non-government organizations
 - Federally-recognized Indian tribes
 - Private Business
 - Individuals
 3. Anyone can apply; SC has received 5 proposals
 - Soil & Water Conservation: Pond Construction & Hydroelectric Power Plant
 - Economic & Agronomic Benefits of the extension of fresh produce growing season through the conversion of abandoned or old existing commercial chicken houses to a climate controlled growing chamber.
 - Multispecies forage system for intensive grazing management. Soil and health nutrition will be monitored through a carbon retention study.
 - Demonstration of Innovation Interseeding Platform to Reduce Nutrient Inputs & weed occurrence while enhancing farm profitability in SC
 - Servicer to positive soil health, wildlife enhancement and to landowner manager's through custom conservation land treatment.
 4. Need five (5) volunteers from State Technical Committee:
 - Sign our life away
 - Confidentiality
 - May not contact applicant
 - Conflict of interest
 - Provide feedback & recommendations only.
 - Feedback due in May 25th to Karen Brady.
 - Volunteers: Yvonne Kling, Marc Cribb, Hezekiah Gibson, Jill Miller & Cassandra Rush

Closing Comments from Ann English, State Conservationist:

- Thanks to CIG volunteers.
- Thanks for attending; will address all questions and concerns.
- Have great week!

The meeting was adjourned at 11:17 a.m.

The next SC State Technical Committee meeting date, time and location to be determined.